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1963/10/10

193. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State[1]

Saigon, October 10, 1963—5 p.m.

676. For Rusk and Harriman from Lodge.

1. This refers to CAS cables [2 *document numbers not declassified*].[2]

2. There has been some sort of assassination rumor on the average of about one in every ten days since I have been here, and we have brushed them aside. But the rumors in above-mentioned cables are sufficiently believable to warrant fresh State-Defense planning on two major points:

a. If I am assassinated in the way indicated in above reports, the deed will in effect have been done by the GVN, however much they attempt to disguise it, since they will have instigated the mob and will have denied us the police protection which they are totally capable of giving us in view of the very large police force in Saigon which is under their absolute control. This will, therefore, automatically constitute a rupture of diplomatic relations and means that present assumptions underlying U.S. presence here would be false. This will have grave consequences for all Americans in Viet-Nam, notably as regards evacuation and there should be fresh contingency planning to cover this situation.

b. If I am assassinated, a new situation would be created which might give us a chance to move effectively for a change of government using methods which would now be rejected by U.S. and world opinion, but which would then become acceptable. There should be State-Defense planning on this.

3. For Diem and Nhu even to be thinking of my assassination is so unbelievably idiotic that a reasonable person would reject it out of hand. But Nhu is apparently pleased with his raids on the Buddhist pagodas last summer and is said to be annoyed with me for having advised him to leave the country for awhile. Also he is reported to be smoking opium. For all these reasons my associates here, whose experience antedates mine, consider assassination to be real possibility. Needless to say, this comes as no surprise, as I realized the possibility of this when I accepted this post.

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[1] Source: Department of State, Central Files, PER–LODGE, HENRY CABOT. Secret; Limit Distribution; Eyes Only. Received at 6:15 a.m. and passed to the White House at 7:07 a.m.

[2] In these telegrams, both October 9, the CIA distributed intelligence, which it cautioned should "be treated with reserve", to the effect that Nhu had ordered a student demonstration against the U.S. Embassy in which he planned to use 100 agents to attack the Embassy, assassinate Lodge and other Embassy officials, and set the chancery afire. Nhu reportedly feared he could not "handle" Lodge and wished him "eliminated." (*Ibid.*, Har-Van Files, Coup South Vietnam)

4. I hope to have the entrance gates to the building closed when crowd begins to gather and for the Marines to throw tear gas from inside to prevent crowd from breaking the gates down. If the crowd tries to enter the building by throwing ladders or other catwalks from the Chinese house next door over to our outside balconies, we will try to throw the ladders off and use tear gas there, too. I plan immediate protest to GVN, either by telephone or via MACV. But I plan no shooting.

5. Am in close consultation with MACV.

6. I have instructed CAS Acting Station Chief to have his agent tell source that if GVN authorities mount such an operation, American retaliation will be prompt and awful beyond description. Source will be invited to examine record of U.S. Marines in Pacific during WW II and ask himself candidly whether GVN wishes to have such a horrible and crushing blow descend on them.[3]

Lodge

[3] McCone called Harriman at 11:10 a.m. on October 10 and part of their conversation related to this cable:

"Mr. McCone said he is quite disturbed about reporting we get out of Saigon; haven't got a thing—nothing about what happened at Monday meeting. Governor said he would call Hilsman. McCone said all he had seen were few telegrams about assassination. Governor said those sounded far-fetched but can't tell. Mr. McCone said Lodge's reply seemed rather hysterical. Governor said he would get after this and let Mr. McCone know if he gets anything." (Library of Congress, Harriman Papers, Telephone Conversations)

The reference to the Monday meeting is apparently to a meeting with General Minh, October 7, to elicit more detailed plans of possible coup planning.